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REPORT OF THE SUB-COMMISSION ON PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION AND PROTECTION OF MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 January 1999]

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Protection of minorities

1. As conflicts within countries become increasingly prevalent throughout the world, the international community is awakening to the critical need to address the question of minorities. Because every country has minorities of some sort, Governments are realizing that the potential for instability may be more widespread than previously imagined. It is, therefore, highly appropriate that the issue of minorities should be on the agenda of the United Nations at this time. The Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, adopted more than five years ago, has already made a major contribution to this discussion by articulating international standards. It states not only that minorities should not be targets of discrimination but that cultural, linguistic and religious diversity within a country should actually be encouraged and safeguarded. Now that the standard has been articulated, the next step is implementation. The Baha'i International Community is pleased to note that the Working Group on Minorities, established by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, is gradually putting into place the means to review the implementation of the Declaration and to address the issues its implementation will raise.

2. In the view of the Baha'i International Community, the responsibility for ensuring equal rights for minorities falls on both minorities and majorities. The ruling groups (whether they be the majority or a minority) have a special responsibility, for the sake of justice, to bring about the social and political adjustments which will enable the other components of their society to exercise, to the fullest extent possible, their common and fundamental rights. Those groups not in power, on the other hand, have a moral responsibility to respond honourably to genuine efforts made and to recognize, accept and fulfil their responsibilities towards society at large. As issues arise, both majorities and minorities must view them in the context of an increasingly interdependent world, where the advantage of the part is best served by ensuring the advantage of the whole, and where the whole cannot flourish when parts are oppressed or deprived.

3. Governments need to take the lead by proving their determination to accord to minorities the same rights accorded to other citizens. This they can do by identifying the conditions that tend to disenfranchise certain minorities and by enacting legislation that will address those conditions. Such legislation is an important step, but legislation alone will never, in and of itself, end discrimination against minorities. Attitudes must change. Groups must learn to view one another in fundamentally different ways. They must see each other as partners, as co-workers, as worthy of respect and just treatment. Majorities must rid themselves of the assumption of entitlement, and minorities must eventually break free of the helplessness and suspicion induced by prolonged discrimination.

4. Legislation can actually facilitate changes in attitude by placing legal sanctions on behaviour that was once considered acceptable. By motivating people to change the way they behave, legislation can stimulate an examination of the beliefs underlying the old behaviour and consideration of the principles that support the new behaviour. But only a change of both heart and mind will permanently eradicate the willingness to hate those we perceive

as different from ourselves. Such a profound change can be effected only through the influence of spiritual and moral principles. The foundation for peace, harmony and stability in the world is the principle of the oneness of humanity. Ignorance of the oneness of the human family makes one vulnerable to irrational fears and hatreds that can be easily stirred up by lies, half-truths, distortions and inflammatory accusations proffered by unscrupulous leaders for their own benefit.

5. But unity is not uniformity; the oneness of the human family implies respect for the diversity within that family. In order to move towards a world characterized by unity in diversity, children must be taught to recognize diversity as a source of enrichment, not as a threat. The Baha'i International Community, therefore, commends the Working Group for its attention to the promotion of multicultural and intercultural education. In our view, an understanding of cultural diversity as the varied expression of our common humanity is one of the keys to the peaceful and lasting resolution of conflicts involving minorities. School curricula should aim at rendering obsolete old animosities, based upon ethnic, linguistic and religious differences, by providing instruction about the various cultures present in each country in a way that highlights those common aspirations that bind us all together as members of the human family. When children are taught to recognize fundamental human qualities in a wide variety of cultural forms, they will be able to regard each culture as enriching society as a whole. They will also be much less vulnerable to manipulation by those who would pit one group against another for political reasons.

6. The Baha'i International Community is convinced that, if the human rights efforts being made by the United Nations and Governments are to bear fruit, the combined force of political and legal, spiritual and moral influences must be employed. For its part, the Baha'i International Community is attempting to address the challenge of nurturing the minorities within its own membership throughout the world. Baha'i communities are obliged by the teachings of their faith not just to tolerate but to nurture, encourage and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class or nation within it. For that reason, the Baha'i Writings suggest that if any discrimination at all is to be tolerated, it should be in favour of the minority. Guided by the unifying principles of world order brought more than a century ago by Bahá'u'lláh, Baha'i communities worldwide are attempting to integrate people of all racial, national and religious backgrounds into a single community - a community that is both unified and diverse.

7. The Baha'i International Community will continue to collaborate with the Working Group on Minorities, and it stands ready to offer its experience in establishing unified communities characterized by respect for diversity.